

Evoking Stillness

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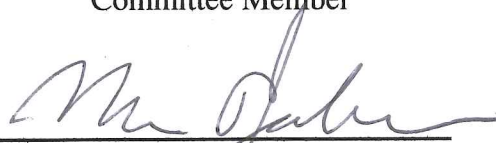
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The intricate patterns and movements of the Basket Starfish spreading it's arms and swaying in the gentle currents of the sea, the glimmer of light through the canopy of a forest shining light upon the pollen and dust riding in the breeze, the tessellations of a Night Blooming Cereus on a warm summer eve; nature is deeply profound and dynamic yet effortless and unselfconscious. Here rests the stillness of mind I seek through my creations. Materials reflect the colors, textures, and movements observed in coral reefs, forests, and botanical gardens; the deep red of the Dragon's Heart Hibiscus and Heliconia, the textures of the flowering palms, and the gentle flow of the current under the surface of the ocean. By integrating aspects of Taoist philosophy and transformative meditative techniques into my studio practice, I utilize my unselfconscious state of mind to create works that reflect the subtleties found in nature to evoke contemplation and stillness in the minds of viewers.

An appreciation for nature was instilled in me through my childhood experiences. I remember dancing in the sunbeams shining through the canopy of my great-grandfather's small orchard, a realm where my imagination thrived, away from the sound of passing cars and the dialogue of adults. I recall staring in wonder at the strange and mysterious plants growing in his makeshift green house. This is my first memory of witnessing the growth of diverse forms that seem otherworldly; the animal-like faces of the Orchids and the nocturnal behavior of the Night Blooming Cereus. I spent many days exploring areas off the paths in the Glen Helen Nature Preserve in Yellow Springs, Ohio with it's changing landscapes around every corner, extending as far as the eye can see. Witnessing the cycle of life in the Beaver creek Wetlands, near my childhood home, I watched as decaying branches lying in the swamp brought fertility to

new growth. Every year my family and I would travel to islands in the Caribbean to explore wondrous underwater worlds full of bizarre creatures and incredible submerged landscapes. I would investigate the deep hues coupled with subtle muted colors thriving together in the plants of un-manicured botanical gardens, as brilliantly colored birds cheerfully forage and sing in the distance. These early natural phenomenological experiences serve as a foundation for the person I am today and my current studio practice.

Later in my life, nature became an escape for me from the overstimulation and stress of daily life and a ferociously painful and debilitating chronic neurological movement disorder, Spasmodic Torticollis. This condition causes the nerves in my neck, shoulders, and upper back to misfire, pulling my muscles violently to the sides. These uncontrollable movements cause my muscles to be in a constant state of tension. The painful injections and nerve blocks used to treat the condition offer only a modicum of relief from the constant muscle spasms and pain. As a means of physical therapy, I use a form of transformative meditation to relax my muscles and calm my mind. The technique I use involves focusing my eyes on one small space. As I relax the body, my mind wanders. Once physically calm, I clear my mind. The result of the physical relaxation is temporary. The mental effect however lasts much longer. I am left in a mindful state, able to focus on the present.<sup>1</sup> Here mindful refers to perception sensitivity. As humans we are flooded with stimuli, which dulls our perception. In a mindful state, the consciousness perceives heightened visceral stimulation of the senses. Colors and lights are brighter. Subtle sounds are easily heard. A slight breeze is

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<sup>1</sup> (Whitmyer 1994)

magnified on the skin. While this state can become overwhelming, the ability to focus on stimuli directed from the world around me is refreshing in comparison to the constant misfiring of nerves and uncontrollable muscle movements that imprison me in my body as a result of my condition. This allows me to control where my mind focuses, ignoring stimuli that I find unsettling. Taoist Master, Daochun Li wrote in *The Book of Balance and Harmony* of meditation as:

*Clearing the mind, dissolving preoccupations, purifying thought, forgetting feelings, minimizing self, lessening desire, seeing the basic, embracing the fundamental-this is meditation of the Transformative Way. When the mind is clear and freed of preoccupations, it is possible to fathom the design of reality; when thoughts are ended and feelings forgotten, it is possible to fathom the essence of reality. When selfishness and desire disappear, it is possible to arrive at the Tao; when one is plain and simple, pure and whole, it is possible to know the celestial.<sup>2</sup>*

Another way I achieve a mindful state is by submerging myself in nature. As an avid SCUBA diver, I often look to the ocean when choosing sensations to represent through my artwork. While diving at night, a person can see the true colors of ocean life. Light dances from the barrel sponges in the form of bioluminescent organisms. During the day, there is a desaturation of color due to the filtration of light through the water. Through conditioning, I have learned to associate the browns, reds, oranges, yellows, and greens, found in abundance on coral reefs as well as in nature on land, with the absence of pain. This association is caused by the sensation of weightlessness while

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<sup>2</sup> (Li 1989)

submerged in water. When at neutral buoyancy, the body feels as through it is uninfluenced by gravity. The weight on the spine is lifted; as a result I am able to physically relax, hovering in a state of painlessness. While in this state, my mind can wander freely soaking in my surroundings without the concentration needed to achieve a meditative state. To me this is bliss; this is when my mind naturally stills.

*From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders.*

*He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface*

*and he is free.<sup>3</sup>*

In a society where humans thrive on technology surrounded by a concrete landscape, nature is overlooked. The natural landscape is now a place to visit, a vacation destination. We invest in green technology and recycle when it is convenient. Consumption has become the lifeblood of western civilization. Obsessive contemplation is directed on oneself rather than our surroundings, the subtleties that surround us, or our place in the world. Living in a society where we are in a continuous state of overstimulation by technology and selfish desires causes us to lose sight of the balance of our own existence. In the teachings of Buddhism and Taoism this balance is regarded as the calm stability of life. According to *The Book of Balance and Harmony*, this is allowing "the body to be tranquil, the mind to be clear, society to be integrated, events to be spontaneous."<sup>4</sup> This concept, found in eastern philosophies, is the balance of yin and yang. However in the west, we choose to live egocentric existences without regard for the space between ourselves and everything else.

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<sup>3</sup> (Michigan 2007)

<sup>4</sup> (Li 1989)

This space outside of ourselves is the void, a philosophical concept found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In *Void-In Art*, by Mark Levy, PhD, it is stated the "The Void is empty in the West because the role of The Void as the ultimate ground of being is usurped by a god or demiurge who usually assumes a human form." Therefore "the Void is empty and lacks presence."<sup>5</sup> In Eastern philosophies however, the void is the space between one, a person, and everything else, whether object or environment. This space is where meaning lies, where the weight of the experience is applied. For example, in James Turrell's *Acton* located in the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the void could be described as the viewer's contemplation, interpretation, and absorption of the reality of the piece. The void is the reason viewers sit in this space absorbing the work as an exhilarating event. It stills the mind allowing the observer to enter a meditative state.

The still mind is a concept described by some as the goal of fasting in spiritual practice and is achieved for me through meditation. This mindset is referred to as wu-wei in Chinese philosophy. A person in wu-wei is described as being in harmony with nature, in rhythm, having good flow, or in the zone. This state is characterized as effortless and spontaneous action, at ease and open, as well as attuned to the environment. It is said that when in wu-wei a person's body, mind, and emotions are fully integrated.<sup>6</sup> In this state, I am able to focus effortlessly allowing my surroundings to simply fade away. In this state, the mind is embodied and the body is mindful.

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<sup>5</sup> (Levy 1953)

<sup>6</sup> (Slingerland 2005)

I use my own state of wu-wei as a process when I create. I choose methods that are not entirely controllable, allowing the element of chance to dictate the result. As a printmaker, I view traditional techniques as a way to channel the spontaneity of nature through process. I utilize chemical reactions and gravity, allowing areas of reticulation or swirling to develop. Copper blooms with oxidation. Sediment flows down the etching plate leaving indentations in their wake. I respond spontaneously to these beautiful outcomes by blocking areas and repeating the method numerous times. I have a nonlinear approach to my work.

Multiple pieces are produced simultaneously. Each piece influencing the processes applied to the others. Each fortuitous result fertilizes the growth of another in a simultaneous harmony between the works. The

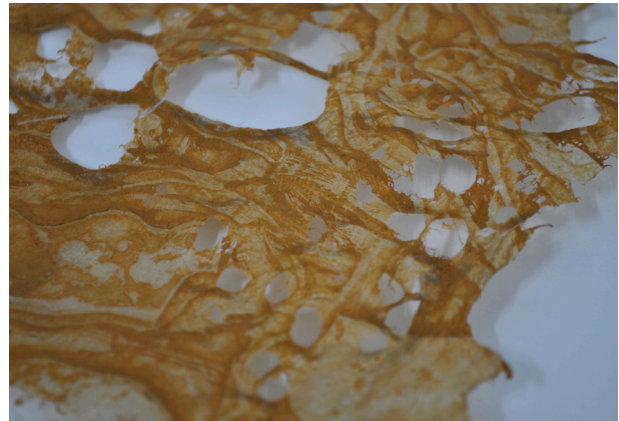


Figure 1: *Foliage* detail

removal of oxidation from a metal plate being prepared for printing leads to using the oxidation as a means of transferring marks made on another plate. The inspiration I draw from natural phenomenon is used in this print work as well as my large-scale installations. For example, in the creation of *Foliage* (figure 1), I etched a copper plate with large exposed areas in an upright acid bath for long periods of time. Gravity allows the loose copper to slide down the plate as it is etched causing unpredictable striations. Using a thin layer of oil based paint; I blocked out areas, and then repeated the process. Each etching duration spanned approximately 2.5 hours. As a result, the acid would slowly eat away at the oil paint leaving behind random rough edges. After completing



these areas, I applied a floating aquatint to the non-etched spaces. This involves sprinkling powdered rosin over acetone, which is then heated to cause a reticulation to occur in the resin. When printed on thin handmade flax paper, the end result is a subtle texture beside deeply embossed valleys of pigments. When viewed, *Foliage* appears as drying leaves, weathered and curling, about to fall from a tree as I witnessed many times during my explorations of the Beavercreek Wetlands.

The process of hand manipulating paper pulp is not entirely controllable and allows the element of chance or nature to dictate the result in the creation of my installations as well as the paper utilized in my print work. I repeat the manipulation numerous times, responding to the resulting textures. Then, I permit the paper to dry unrestrained, allowing it to curl naturally working in conjunction with the natural flow of the fibers. The flax and abaca pulp provides organic color with transparent elements as well as a connection to the plant-life that inspires me. In *Effloresce* (figure 2), thin panels, differing in width, length, and color, are created and hand manipulated to add reticulation to the natural texture, deviations in thickness, and fissures in the paper. This emphasizes the delicate appearance of the fibers. Like naturally occurring plants, the paper appears fragile but truly is quite strong. Pigments in organic hues of yellow, brown, red, and green are added, both during the



Figure 2: *Effloresce* detail 1

papermaking process as well as afterward through spraying and soaking the paper, to replicate the various colors found in nature. Last, luster pigments are added to enhance the paper panels with areas of subtle shine, which are illuminated when the paper sways into the beams cast from above hinting of the bioluminescent organisms present in environments.

I consider my work as an artist as a visual representation of my own visceral and meditative reactions to natural phenomenon. While creating, my serendipitous process allows me to continue in my mindful state as previously described, retaining the flow of energy through my body relieving the pain that will inevitably retake me once my mind has returned to the everyday stress outside of my studio.<sup>7</sup>

Tenuously hung from nylon threads affixed to the ceiling of the gallery, the feathery weight of the panels, in *Effloresce*, allow the paper to meander and wave with the fluid nature of life, like the flow of a breeze or the gentle current of the ocean, in response to the airflow in the room. . Thin tendrils of fibers brush lightly against the skin. Where lit, the backlighting allows the viewer to see the subtle changes in color, luminescence, and texture. Light shines through the gaps in the material. Shadows dance across the walls creating moiré patterns that move from the soothing motion of the paper (figure 3). In



Figure 3: *Effloresce* detail 2

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<sup>7</sup> (Levy 1953)

areas effected only by ambient light, the colors and texture appear subtler. The shadows are inspired by Cornelia Parker's piece, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, where the silhouettes demand space creating a manifestation that cannot be physically touched but command a presence in the work as much as the materials used to create them.<sup>8</sup>

All of these elements are combined in the installation *Effloresce* to establish an immersive environment intent on inducing a state of calm or stillness in the mind of the viewer. The mind stills as one stops to notice these intrinsic events. The environment is reminiscent of natural settings. Although the materials are constrained physically by walls, the shadows allow the atmosphere to remain unrestrained. The immersive character of the piece encourages contemplation where the void has presence.

This installation will grow and change with it's surroundings over time following the essence of nature. I'm reminded again of my great-grandfather's orchard and gardens. As he aged, the land became overgrown as if nature was reclaiming that which was so carefully tended to for years. While at times this might seem disheartening, the beauty of the vines taking over the fallen branches and the blooms from the wild flowers mixed with the resilient species previously cared for blossom into an elegant realm of creatures and plants full of color and life. The growth of this installation will have much the same effect. The continuous addition of panels in response to future installation spaces will allow the piece to thrive and grow in reaction to the surroundings like nature reclaiming areas overrun by manmade structures.

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<sup>8</sup> (Design n.d.)

The limitlessness of growth in *Effloresce* contributes to the immensity of the work. The experience of immensity can be found in most natural phenomenon. I draw on my own experiences of immensity from large wooded areas, the botanical gardens of the Cayman Islands, but most of all from The Great Blue Hole



Figure 4: Great Blue Hole, Belize;  
photograph courtesy of Robert Parks

in Belize (figure 4). Diving in this space is otherworldly. A visually endless cavern surrounded by volcanic rock first confronts you. After descending over one hundred feet into the abyss, enormous stalactites appear around you accompanied by dripstone sheets. Words cannot express this awe-inspiring experience. This ancient sinkhole surpasses the imagination, exceeding most other naturally occurring environments.

The continuation of *Effloresce* is an extension of its own existence. Elements in nature continue to grow, expand, and exist whether we as humans are present to experience them or not. The currents in the ocean will continue to flow even when no one is there to feel them. Time continues in our absence.<sup>9</sup> I imagine my paper panels hanging in a gallery space after hours when all the visitors have gone, swaying in the airflow, shadows dancing from the ambient light creeping in from beneath the door. All is quite, unseen, and the dance of *Effloresce* continues (figure 5).

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<sup>9</sup> (Bachelard 1958)

In my installation work, I seek out ways to evoke this blissful stilling in viewers and myself through phenomenological experience. Whereas I view my print works as documentation of the journey to this idyllic state. Along with nature, I look to other artists for ways to bring my ideas to fruition. Much like the way Ann Hamilton's installations evoke a sense of remembrance, as if the viewer were in the



Figure 5: *Effloresce*

presence of an echo from historical events. In *myein*, shown at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, she used vinyl dust and light as her medium. Her work fills the room with atmosphere and hints of memory without out the need to fill the space with physical material.<sup>10</sup>

In *Effloresce*, delicate organic forms surround the viewer as one enters the room. Natural shades rise from the ground fading into muted hues that grow into a cool brightness from above. A glimmer of light echoes from a surface and is gone as quickly as it appeared. The plant-like structures breath in harmony with one another in the silence of the space. Thin filaments brush softly against the skin, kissing the small hairs relaxed against the arm. Shadows take form as they slowly dance across the surface of the walls in a gentle ballet that quiets the mind. Time slows and the world beyond fades away. The viewer's breath is slow and deep as tranquility guides contemplation.

This tranquil state of contemplation and stillness incited in my viewers is the state in which I seek to live my life, wu-wei. I retain this state through meditation,

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<sup>10</sup> (Baas 2004)

exploring nature, and my studio practice; seeking ways to evoke stillness in the minds of viewers as well as myself, while striving for a life that is mindful and free from pain. Away from technology, consumption, concrete landscapes, and selfish desires; in this stillness there is balance and where there is balance there is bliss.

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